

# KATE BEGLEY FOCUSING ON THE POSITIVE

by Vivienne Pearson

Kate Begley, 42 is a single parent and legally blind. She was diagnosed with an untreatable condition at age 28, not long before becoming pregnant with her first child.

Since her separation, she has completed university studies, started a new career and moved to live independently with her boys.

Vivienne Pearson spoke with Kate to hear about what it is like to live as a single parent with partial sight in a world where image is everything.



Kate uses a magnifying lens to read her iPhone

Kate and her boys, Eli (10) and Joseph (7)



**At the age of 23, Kate Begley started having difficulty recognising people. At 24, white spots started appearing in her vision. For a couple of years, she was determined to keep the news of her deteriorating vision to herself but, by age 28, the dots had merged to literally become a blind spot.**

It only took 15 minutes for an ophthalmologist to discover that Kate suffers from Macular Dystrophy, a genetic disorder that damages cells that are critical for central vision.

"I was in shock. It was like an out of body experience," Kate recalls of that day.

Unlike the better known Macular

Degeneration, there is no treatment. The centre of Kate's vision is now completely white and, outside that circle, she sees more diffused white dots that pulse. Only her peripheral vision is clear.

On the day of her diagnosis, Kate clearly recalls the ophthalmologist saying: "All you can do now is go and get some support."

Kate was unable to get any support from her now ex-partner. In retrospect, the fact that she had not been able to confide in him about her deteriorating eyesight was a sign that their relationship was not strong.

"I couldn't trust his love for me," she says.

He ended their relationship when Kate was

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30 weeks pregnant with their second son.

“All I can say is that it was not an amicable separation,” says Kate, who is reluctant to divulge more detail, out of concern for her boys, who are now aged ten and seven.

What her sons do know is that they need to help their mum out in all sorts of ways during everyday life. Although Kate moved in with her parents after her separation, she now lives just with her boys.

“A lot of it is little things, like reading jars for me, checking use-by dates, checking whether meat is cooked and reading out school notices,” she says.

“I can't tell whether their clothes are clean, so my mum checks them for me. As for whether the house is clean enough, I don't 100% know.”

Kate has experienced burns when cooking but is super cautious when doing household chores.

One of the major challenges Kate faces is not being able to drive. Kate says her sons are embarrassed by the family's reliance on taxis, as well as her use of a small, high-powered magnifying lens when reading her iPhone.

There are upsides to the boys' needing to be

more aware of their mum than an average child.

“They are empathetic and sensitive, which I am glad about,” says Kate. And they are articulate, a strength developed through her boys describing things she can't see.

“I can't see the television too well, apart from the colours, so the boys are really good at telling me what is going on,” Kate says. This has become such a habit that it can lead to some funny situations:

“We haven't been to many movies but we went to see *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and I had to tell them that we can't talk that much in the cinema!”

Kate's big sadness is that she can't read bedtime stories to her sons.

“This is a real disappointment,” she says. “It would have been nice intimacy.”

She is also sad that she can't see their facial expressions or their art work as clearly as she'd like.

From the moment of her diagnosis, Kate has received huge support from Vision Australia, the support and education service for people who are blind or have low vision. For someone who denied her worsening

vision, even to herself, for so long, this is a huge change.

"It was an almost instant switch," she says.

"I know other people go the other direction, who want to process it alone and be private. I was the exact opposite. I would go and sit in the canteen hoping to bump into other people who were blind or with low vision hoping to strike up a conversation."

Little did she think that one day she would work at this same organization. Kate is now a Policy Advisor at Vision Australia. While her sons were young, she completed a Graduate Diploma in Public Relations, her natural intelligence and hard work well supported by RMIT's Disability Liaison Unit.

At work, Kate uses adaptive equipment, including a keyboard with large letters and high contrast colours ("it's bright canary yellow"), a monitor arm ("so I can pull it as close to my face as I like"), a CCTV ("like a big TV with a camera – if I put a hard copy under the camera I'm able to read tiny bits of whatever is on there"), software that magnifies on-screen text, and a phone that reads out who is calling. She relies on websites having good accessibility features, such as resizable text, good contrast and tagged images.

Kate also receives enormous collegial and peer support from working within an organisation where approximately 15% of the



600 staff are blind or have low vision.

"There is a strong sense of camaraderie," she says.

Of all the achievements since her diagnosis, perhaps the most important to Kate is her emotional journey following her separation.

"I was sad and angry for so long," she says. "I struggled to accept that this was my lot in life - that I couldn't raise my kids in a traditional family."

Though the changes have mainly been gradual, moving out from her parents' house was a big emotional turning point.

"I felt like I was really starting my new life," she says.

"It has taken me this long to feel really happy raising the kids by myself and not lamenting all the time," she reflects.

"It's been a gradual process. It used to be a constant ache and now it's hardly ever."